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**Ontario**



**Ministry of  
Community and  
Social Services**

# *Child Abuse Prevention*

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# *Introduction*

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This booklet is addressed to everyone in Ontario who cares about children. It is about a subject most people do not like to think about—child abuse. But with an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 children in Ontario being hurt physically or emotionally, sexually assaulted and even killed every year as a result of child abuse, it is a subject that cannot be ignored.

There is no easy way to detect abuse or to prevent it. We do know, however, that solving it will take increased understanding and cooperation from everyone. People must be willing to become involved. It takes courage for a neighbour, relative, or friend to report suspected abuse.

And it takes judgement and skill for people likely to come in contact with abuse—doctors, social workers, nurses, teachers, police and others—to recognize the problem and take action.

In every community, cooperative teams are needed to provide the special skills required to deal with child abuse. These teams must be adequately prepared through exposure to the most up-to-date information, training courses, and materials available if they are to present an effective force to combat child abuse.

# *What is child abuse?*

Child abuse is a new term for an old problem. Maltreatment and the neglect of children has always been around. It is only recently, however, that society has come to recognize it as a serious problem. With that awareness has come a growing demand for child-protection laws, training programs for professionals and treatment programs for abusers and victims.

At the same time, child abuse is a complex problem. Some forms of abuse are more difficult to detect than others.

For example, child neglect—whether physical or emotional—is also considered abuse in Ontario. So “abuse” can mean both actively hurting a child or failing to take proper care of a child or depriving that child of affection and acceptance. It can range from habitually humiliating a child, to denying a child the nurturing he or she needs; from excessive shaking to the rape of a small child. Abuse in Ontario law also means doing nothing to stop it from happening—in others words “permitting” abuse is against the law. No single definition can cover all types of abuse.

Children are dependent upon adults, particularly their parents or guardians. While there are laws that offer children some protection, they may not be sufficiently well-known. To be effective, these laws must be understood and supported by the community.

In Ontario, there are 51 children’s aid societies throughout the province. These societies have been given the responsibility and authority under

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the Child Welfare Act to take action to help children in need of protection. The Child Welfare Act also states that "any person who has information of the abandonment, desertion, or need for protection of a child, or the infliction of abuse upon a child" must report that information to their local children's aid society. The Act places a special onus on people who run into suspected abuse in the course of their professional or official duties—nurses, teachers, doctors, police officers and others.

It is also important to know that under the Child Welfare Act anyone who reports suspected violence against or neglect of children is protected from legal action "unless the giving of information is done maliciously or without reasonable grounds".

The goal of the children's aid society in dealing with suspected child abuse is two-fold: to protect the child, and to help the family solve the problem that led to the abuse. There are times when children may have to be taken from their families temporarily or permanently. But if the family members can be helped to deal constructively with their problems, it is better if a child can remain in his or her own home.



# *Sexual abuse*

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Of all the forms of abuse, perhaps the most difficult one for people to come to terms with is sexual abuse.

Contrary to popular belief, most sexual abuse seems to be committed by parents, relatives or friends of the family rather than strangers. The evidence suggests that incest occurs more often than we are willing to acknowledge.

Children do not always appear to be damaged by an incestuous relationship and they do not always want to leave home. However, the potential for psychological damage is enormous.

While small children or even infants can be victims of sexual abuse, most are girls around the age of puberty, and frequently the offender is the victim's natural father, or the spouse or boyfriend of the child's mother. A mother may be aware of such a relationship and yet make no attempt to discourage it. A father may engage in sexual acts with more than one daughter over a period of years.

Some girls continue the relationship to "save" the family or a younger sister from the same fate.

It is crucial that a child's disclosure of sexual abuse be handled with sensitivity.

Negative reactions, including expressions of horror, disbelief or blame, can sometimes be just as damaging to the child as the act itself.

# *Emotional abuse*

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Most parents would never think of using physical force to discipline a child, but some parents fail to realize that they can inflict serious damage by what they say. If a child hears “you’re no good”, often enough, chances are that the child will come to believe it and act accordingly.

Parents can also abuse a child emotionally by withholding the warmth and affection every child needs. Experts have found that holding, cuddling and talking to an infant are essential for normal growth and development—both emotional and physical. Affection and acceptance continue to be vital to a child’s well-being throughout his or her growing up years.

Lack of this kind of parenting, particularly when combined with verbal abuse, can be especially devastating for a child.

# *Detection*

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It does not take a specialist to recognize or suspect most forms of child abuse. Friends, neighbours, public health nurses, teachers, doctors, police, social workers, clergy, school bus drivers, recreation workers, probation officers and building superintendents are among those who come in contact with abuse most frequently.

Everyone has seen a child on a bus or in a store being cruelly slapped, pulled or verbally attacked. Such incidents make us angry but rarely do we intervene or offer to help. Next time you see this happening, why not offer some help. Perhaps you could say, "I know you must be tired; can I hold your child for you while you go through the checkout counter?"

Some parents are aware of what they are doing. Some seek help but the majority do not. It is not always easy to identify an abused child. The child's injuries may be covered by clothing, or the parents may tell convincing stories of accidents. The abused child may give a rehearsed explanation.

Careful physical examination can help a doctor to determine whether a child's injury concurs with the parents' explanation. X-rays may show a history of fractures in various stages of healing. A sexually molested child may have bruises, lacerations, vaginal discharge or venereal disease.

People who abuse children often deny responsibility, and medical evidence may be needed if a recurrence of abuse is to be prevented.



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But there are other indications of abuse besides physical injury. For example, a serious delay in normal growth and development is, in many instances, the result of physical handicaps. However, in some cases it may be the result of deprivation or neglect.

A child's behaviour or appearance may also indicate abuse. Some abused infants exhibit what is described as "frozen watchfulness". School-age children may be withdrawn, too eager to please, inappropriately aggressive, manipulative, demanding of attention or food. They may be dressed in torn or filthy clothing, undernourished or overtired.

These signs might be evidence of other problems, but the watchful adult should at least consider the possibility of abuse, even if the idea is abhorrent, and the parents are known to be "nice" people.

# *How common is it?*

In 1982, children's aid societies reported approximately 700 verified cases of child abuse to Ontario's Child Abuse Register, although it is estimated that between 2,000 and 3,000 children in Ontario are seriously abused every year. Most child abuse never becomes known outside the family circle; and a significant amount of abuse that does come to the attention of someone such as a teacher or doctor is not reported to the children's aid society. The societies themselves do not necessarily report all cases of abuse to the Register—primarily borderline cases, or cases in which the society is not sufficiently convinced that abuse has occurred. The children's aid society, before filing a report with the Register, must find evidence that a child was hurt or molested and that such a condition was the fault of a parent or someone having charge of the child.

Deaths officially attributed to child abuse by the Chief Coroner of Ontario now average about five a year.

For a description of the Child Abuse Register see section entitled *What Ontario is doing*.

# *Abusers and the abused*

Child abuse is not confined to families whose members are economically deprived, educationally disadvantaged, mentally ill, or drug or alcohol addicted. That may sometimes appear to be so, because abused children from these groups come more readily to the attention of the authorities. In reality, abusers come from all walks of life and all economic groups.

Research studies in general reveal that in some three-quarters of the known cases, the child's parents are the abusers. In the remaining cases, the abusers are substitute parents, brothers and sisters, relatives or temporary guardians.

A child of any age, including a growing number of adolescents, may be the object of physical, emotional or sexual assault, although cases involving infants are the ones most often detected. For children under 13, there seems to be little difference in the number of incidents of abuse involving girls and boys. Over the age of 13, there are more cases involving girls.



# *Causes of abuse*

The reasons for abuse are infinitely varied, but there are some patterns and some situations in which abuse is more apparent than in others.

Abuse often results when stress is brought to the breaking point by intolerable pressures, alcohol or drugs. Sometimes abuse is inflicted in the belief that it is for the good of the child.

It may arise out of cultural conflict or as a repetition of the abuser's own childhood experience. Some parents do not know alternatives to the use of physical punishment for disciplining their children. Others do not know what behaviour is appropriate at various ages and may harshly punish a child for not meeting their own unrealistic expectations.

Although their actions appal many people, child abusers are people with serious problems who need help. Experts in the field believe that at least three-quarters of them can be helped.

Many researchers believe that violence against children is allowed to continue because society generally is tolerant of violence. There is also a widely held belief that the way parents treat their children is nobody else's business. However, there is now a greater recognition that children have a right to protection from abuse.

# *Abusers can be treated*

Child abusers can be helped only when the reasons for the abuse are determined. The immediate goal is to end the abuse. This is not accomplished easily or quickly.

Sometimes removing a child or children from a home temporarily or permanently is the only practical solution, but there are other approaches, too, that have proved successful.

Abuse often results from ignorance, frustration or isolation. Education in child development and how to cope with discipline problems can help.

Support from homemakers, foster-grandparents, baby-sitters, friendly visitors, lay therapists and counsellors; the provision of extra financial assistance; even installation of a telephone, may be helpful in some cases.

For people who acknowledge that they are abusive and want to do something about it, group therapy such as that offered by Parents Anonymous may be helpful. Such support and acceptance, and the awareness that there are others who cannot always cope with children, have helped many parents to solve their own problems.

# *What can you and I do about it?*

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## *If you're an ordinary citizen*

The problem of child abuse is everyone's responsibility. In fact, you are required under the Child Welfare Act to report suspicions of abuse. If you suspect a child is being abused, hurt or neglected, get in touch with your local children's aid society immediately. Check the telephone directory for the office closest to you. The emergency page in most Ontario telephone directories has the number to call for suspected child abuse.

Children's aid society workers have the authority and the responsibility to take immediate action. If need be, they can remove a child immediately to a place of safety.

All children's aid societies have emergency service 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so you can call anytime. A worker will investigate each report discreetly, and if necessary call on the police or other community agencies for help.

Never hesitate to contact your local children's aid society if you think a child is being abused. No matter how well staffed a society may be, or how skilled its workers, a society needs the cooperation and support both from other professionals and the community in general.

Remember too, early reporting of child abuse often results in a family receiving the help and guidance needed to prevent a major crisis.



Another way you can help is by becoming a volunteer with a social agency. The protection of children in your community depends upon many volunteers; your local children's aid society uses volunteers in many ways, from working with abusing parents to serving on committees and the board of directors. Take an interest in the work done by your children's aid society, police department, schools, and day-care centres to prevent child abuse.

*If your work brings you in contact with children*

If your work brings you into frequent contact with children, then you have a special responsibility under the law to report suspected child abuse. The Child Welfare Act requires that people such as teachers, police officers, doctors and nurses who, in the course of their professional or official duties, have reasonable grounds to suspect child abuse, must report their suspicions to a children's aid society. Failure to do so may result in a fine of up to \$1,000.

You must report any suspected abuse to your local children's aid society, even if it involves confidential or privileged information. Only solicitor-client privilege is exempted under this law.

Maybe you feel others are better placed or trained to intervene? The fact is, however, that in your work you may get a unique view of a child's life, health and behaviour. Your special judgement could be indispensable. If you are still uncertain, consult with your colleagues. Your action could save a life.

# *Prevention*

Preventing abuse begins when people recognize its existence and are willing to get involved in reporting suspected abuse.

Failure to act can mean that a child may be killed, irreparably damaged or forced to endure suffering that will affect his or her entire life.

Some battered children will grow up to batter their own children because it is the only form of child-rearing they know. Preliminary studies indicate that many of society's violent criminals were seriously abused, neglected or deprived as children. Prevention of child abuse, therefore, can mean a reduction in violence in society generally.

One important child abuse prevention measure is the education of parents in the basics of parenting and child development. More and more pre-natal, post-natal and early childhood education programs are becoming available for parents. At the same time, educators are being encouraged to include courses in parenting, child development and human relations in school curricula.

Professionals such as doctors, nurses and teachers can help, too, by offering advice and assistance when they encounter parents or parents-to-be who are fearful of the responsibilities of being parents or who show negative attitudes to their children or future children.

Sometimes training or counselling can help parents face their responsibilities and develop more satisfying relations with their children.

# What Ontario is doing

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In 1966, the Ministry of Community and Social Services established a central registry to receive and compile reports of child abuse from children's aid societies.

Then in 1979, the central registry was replaced by the Child Abuse Central Register. Unlike the old registry, terms of reference for the new Register are set down in the Child Welfare Act. The Act also includes a legal definition of child abuse and establishes fines for inflicting or permitting abuse. Guidelines and procedures have been established by the Ministry of Community and Social Services for the management by children's aid societies of child abuse cases and for reporting child abuse cases to the Register. Under the Child Welfare Act, children's aid societies must report *verified* cases of child abuse to the Central Register. Alleged abusers must be notified, and informed that they can inspect the information, appeal to have errors corrected or have their names removed from the Register.

The Ministry also established a Child Abuse Program under the direction of a full-time coordinator in 1976 to fund and promote projects and activities across the province.

Through the Child Abuse Prevention Program, as it is called today, the Ministry has given support and encouragement to the creation of local child abuse planning committees and multi-professional diagnostic and treatment teams who work with children and representatives of community social service agencies. The Child Abuse Prevention Program also provides funding



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for research and demonstration projects, many initiated by local committees and service agencies.

At the same time, the program is involved in a range of public education and professional training activities and projects including:

- distributing training materials to colleges, universities, hospitals and social service agencies;
- establishment of a central free loan library on child abuse for the training of professionals and education of the public (local libraries on child abuse have also been established in over 50 Ontario communities with funds from the Program);
- funding seminars and training workshops for professionals such as doctors, nurses, teachers, police, social workers, judges and lawyers;
- distributing special reports and publications to professionals to assist in keeping them informed about the latest findings and most up-to-date approaches in dealing with child abuse;
- distributing pamphlets to the public to make them aware of the problem of child abuse and give them advice on how to be better parents.

Through conferences, consultation and funding, the Child Abuse Prevention Program is helping to foster cooperation among local agencies, professionals and the general public in the fight against child abuse.







# Ontario

Ministry of  
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For the nearest office of the Ministry, please see Community and Social Services in the Ontario Government section of the blue pages of your telephone directory.



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